GOD WITH A HUMAN FACE
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The issue is simple. It is put, in all its simplicity and profundity, in a vignette which is told about the late Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the two or three theological giants of our generation. His definition of faith, which has become quite popular, was "ultimate concern". The story, then, is told of an old man with whom Tillich was conversing. "What is your ultimate concern?" the professor asked. And the man replied, "Whether the ultimate is concerned about me." The issue is simple, and that is it.

There are easier things to deal with on Christmas Sunday, I suppose. The agenda, after all is quite full: there are parties to attend, cookies to bake, gifts to purchase, trees to decorate, families will be gathering and the several days ahead will be busier and happier than any others. But beneath it all, just under the surface, is the most profound question - the question of God. Not, if you please, the question of His existence. Atheism is not the issue and never has been. After all there really aren't many of them. Madalyn Murray O'Hare makes a great deal of noise to be sure, but her paranoia about being maligned and attacked from the pulpit is a bit exaggerated. Mostly, from the pulpits I know at least, she is ignored. Most people continue to believe in the existence of a supreme being. The question is "what kind?"

It is not an easy question to talk about today. Traditional concepts, traditional ways of thinking about God are no longer convincing. Thoughtful people don't envision God on a throne up in the sky any longer. We may still pray for rain in the midst of a drought and thank God when it finally comes. But there is a certain "tongue-in-cheekiness" about it all. Meteorologists know very well why it does not rain. And we all know that while it won't hurt anything to pray, our time is better spent building bigger reservoirs. But beyond the difficulty for belief created by the scientific sophistication of our age, we have real problems seeing the evidence of God's presence and His activity in the world around us. Once again the simple concepts of the past don't help. What kind of an omnipotent God would allow or cause a DC-3 to crash into an Indiana cornfield last week: or a young man to die of a heart attack, or a little child to contract leukemia? George Arthur Buttrick had a little fun with his fundamentalist brothers down in Louisville at the time of the Tornado in 1975. He wrote, "A group of preachers said in a public statement that it was God's judgment on our sins. Unhappily for those preachers the storm missed the saloons and brothels and hit the Baptist Seminary." (The Meaning of These Things, Mann: Miracle on Main Street, p.67).

The existence of evil and tragedy and suffering in the world challenge the veracity of a simple-minded theology. The son of the South Side woman who was killed earlier this fall in a robbery attempt on her neighborhood store was asked by a reporter how he felt. There was no way to make some kind of moral sense out of what happened to her. Her son said, "the world's a rotten place."

Every theologian worth his salt has dealt with the issue in the period which has elapsed since World War II. Rabbi Richard Reubenstein in a book, After Auschwitz, announced, understandably, that it no longer makes sense to think about a God whose will and presence may be seen in history. Frederick Buchner, in a brand new book writes: "The world hides God from us, or we hide ourselves from God, or for reasons of his own God hides himself from us, but however you account for it, he is often more conspicuous by his absence than by his presence." (Telling the Truth, p.42-3).

As a result one of two things ordinarily happens to us and our theology: we either go off helter-skelter on a frantic search for an answer, or we lower our sights and settle for a God so safely abstract that His existence is merely academic. Proposed answers are coming at us so fast today the individual has to be a speed reader simply to know their names: Transcendental Meditation, Zen, Yoga, Transactional Analysis, Scientology, Astrology, Group Therapy, Gestalt, even jogging. At the level of the fad our culture has become a veritable supermarket of theological alternatives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Or - we settle for the safety of abstraction. Karl Barth wrote, "...when we pronounce or hear the word 'God' we think of the highest, the deepest, the absolute, the ultimate force...We are in constant temptation to think of some abstraction." (Deliverance to the Captives, p.111).

I thought about Star Wars when I read that. One of the best motion pictures of the year, Star Wars is a space fantasy which provides the staging for the eternal conflict between good and evil. Behind and on the side of the "good guys" in Star Wars is something called "The Force". "The force be with you", they say to one another; which while similar to a traditional Christian statement such as "God be with you" or "God speed", is vague enough to be palatable.

We live in a time which has made believing in God difficult. The individual must cope with the abundance of alternatives clamoring for attention and the very real temptation of abstraction. And that, beneath tinsel, tree and wreath, is what is on the agenda at the time when we propose to say something distinctly Christian about the birth in Bethlehem.

It is an occasion, I believe, for rediscovering our roots. When we look to our history we may be surprised. From the time men and women could think, speak and write, they have thought, spoken and written about God. The intellectual history of the human race is the story of people drawing pictures, dancing dances, writing philosophies to deal with the ultimate matters of death and birth, good and evil. The results are magnificent art but theological silence. It is within the history of a remote group of semite tribes that people heard a voice: God was addressed: God became a "thou" for Israel. Professor Hans Kung writes: "From the first to the last page of the Bible there is talk not only about God, but constantly also to and with God, praising and complaining, begging and protesting." (On Being a Christian, p.304).

Our roots are radical. Unlike everybody else's favorite diety, the God of Israel is not confined to splendid isolation in the far reaches of the universe, or the depths of the human spirit, or Mt. Olympus, or even Heaven. The God of Israel mixes it up with His people, hears their crying, lobbies on their behalf, leads them through a wilderness, weeps when they are disobedient, punishes them and then loves them back into their covenant with Him. Again, Professor Kung: "He is not apathetic, unfeeling, impassive, but a sympathetic, compassionate God. In brief, He is God with a human face." (Ibid, p.308).

In the fullness of time, this God, perfectly consistent with His history of involvement with His people, came among them again - by becoming one of them! Christmas celebrates that - the incarnation, the "enfleshing" of God. Matthew and Luke tell the story of a birth and give us something with which we are comfortable.

But the New Testament's resident philosopher, John, approaches differently. While Luke is reaching for our heart, John is reaching for our mind. "In the beginning was the Word," he wrote, " and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And then incredibly, radically, awesomely, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." There are two words translated "flesh" in the New Testament. One of them means flesh as opposed to spirit and is a very broad word: "humankind" would be an apt rendering. The other word ordinarily means "skin" - good old epidermis. The philosopher - evangelist chose this word, which is to say that God not only makes common cause with humanity, identifying with the human race, He actually gets in our skin, becomes one of us in our individual humanness. That remains the basic and radical claim of the Gospel. That is why we have something to shout about this week.

It is not always a comfortable idea because it isn't at all abstract. When Christians talk about God, post Christmas, we're not talking philosophical concepts, but a man, a life like ours. The Christ of the New Testament is fully human, accused by His contemporaries of drinking too much wine and eating too much food. He got tired, angry, laughed and wept and He died as every human being must die. In Him - not just His birth story - but His life and death and resurrection we see the very face of God.

He taught those around Him that the best word for God was a very human word - "father". He used it constantly, and on occasion made it even more intimate by invoking the Hebrew household term - "abba", the best translation of which is "Daddy". That's how human the face of God is.

The Gospel of Christmas suggests that it proclaims a God as personal as a father and as intimate as the birth of a baby. The important ideas at Christmas are God's love and His intimacy and His dependability and also His vulnerability. There is something about the human constitution that understands that intuitively. Parents love in a way that becomes more vulnerable the more they love. Parents don't exercise omnipotence over the lives of their children. In fact, the very essence of parenting is to love enough to let go: to love and then grant freedom which always means risk and danger. No parent wants a child to get hurt: every parent knows the exquisite pain of watching a little one toddle off to school - out into the world when accidents happen and people hurt one another. Every parent knows the painful paradox of wishing desperately to protect a little one from that and yet knowing that to love fully is precisely to grant the freedom in which it might, and probably will, happen. Every parent knows the necessity of patient love which holds its tongue and waits and hopes and prays and then loves some more. Every parent knows the task of simply "being there" when needed, the blessed presence to which the child may return any time.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem proclaims a God like that: a God who makes no guarantees about our destiny, our well being, even our safety, not because He is powerless, but precisely because He loves us so much: a God who does not give us answers to every question, but gives Himself and stands with us as we struggle for the answers. Christmas celebrates a God with a human face.

Whether we acknowledge it or not our ultimate concern is whether the ultimate is concerned about us. In the most beloved account of the nativity an angel announces the birth in Bethlehem to a group of shepherds. In terms of what we know about public relations it was a curious way to announce the birth to the whole world. But the account, on second look, is not global, but personal. The birth of Jesus Christ comes at us as individuals: "to YOU" it reads: not to humanity in the abstract, not to the whole human race, but to "you - is born this day" - which means you and me.

The Gospel of Christmas is good news because it addresses us where we are most human: at the point of our highest joy, fondest hopes, greatest loves and deepest hurts. A young widow wrote the Advent Meditation in last week's Christian Century, a high-powered theological journal not given to sentiment. She wrote about how it was when her husband died unexpectedly, how she survived somehow, how the questions came" "Why? Why? Why?" Listen to her testimony: it is the Gospel.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

"The woman believes that this mystery holds the answer. Because the manger led to the cross and an empty tomb, all of life is forever changed. Because the sweet little Jesus boy of the carols became the Lord of life, God can be trusted to meet our needs, no matter what they are.

"Some say to the woman, 'This first Christmas without your husband will be hard for you.' Probably it will be, but without Christmas, her life would be impossible." (The Christian Century, December 14, 1977, p.1157).

So let us celebrate. Let us come once again to the feast. Our God is a God with a human face.

"Behold, I bring you news of a great joy...to you is born this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Amen.

Father, we come again: with all the customs that are dear to us. Bless our celebrating: bless our reunions and happiness: bless our poignant memories: and in and through it all help us to hear again the tidings of Your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.